DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 257 733 SO 016 535

AUTHOR Michaels, Greta
TITLE Writing...A Tool for Learning.
PUB DATE 83
NOTE 5p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Minnesota Council of Teachers of English (25th, Mankato, MN, May 4-5, 1984).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
JOURNAL CIT Minnesota Council for the Social Studies Newsletter; v4 n1 Fall 1983

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Content Area Writing; Educational Objectives; Elementary Secondary Education; *Instructional Improvement; Instructional Materials; *Interdisciplinary Approach; Learning Activities; Learning Processes; *Teaching Methods; *Writing Exercises; Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

Addressing the concern that writing assignments are used only for recording or relating information, a program called "Writing in Content Areas" has been developed in Minnesota to help students and teachers use writing as a tool for learning. Students are encouraged to use expressive writing for working out ideas, relationships, understandings, and feelings. Teachers can assign expressive writing for many purposes, but the primary purpose is to foster active learning. Expressive writing is effective because it forces students to participate constructively by writing about their work. Such writing can be used in all subject areas. Suggestions for activities incorporating expressive writing fall into the following categories: (1) introducing a subject and finding out what students already know, (2) helping students gain control of the subject material, (3) helping students clarify their understanding of what they are learning, and (4) helping students know themselves and helping the teacher to understand them. (IS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED257733

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☒ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Greta B. Michaels

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

WRITING...A TOOL FOR LEARNING

Greta Michaels
St. Paul Public Schools
St. Paul, Minnesota

1983

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Minnesota Council of Teachers of English (25th, Mankato, MN, May 4-5, 1984).

50 016 535

Minnesota Council
For The
Social Studies

State Organization Service, 11 Oak St., Minneapolis, MN 55414

NEWSLETTER

Volume IV Number 1 Fall 1983

"Writing...A Tool For Learning"

Mechanical and informational.

That's how almost all of the writing done by students in American secondary schools was categorized by Dr. Arthur N. Applebee in his study, ***Writing in the Secondary School*** (Research Report #21, National Council of Teachers of English, Urbana, IL, 1981).

Instead of helping our students use writing as a tool for learning, we assign mechanical writing tasks which require no composing, only filling in answers. Instead of helping our students write because they need to communicate, we emphasize recording or relating information. Virtually all writing done by our students is done for us, the teachers, as evaluators. We ask for very little writing of more than a paragraph in length, for very little writing which requires our students to think and to generate language.

It's easy to imagine a teacher who reads this declaring, "I already have more to do than I can manage. I'm not even an English teacher. We never have enough time to cover all the material as it is." True. As Dr. Applebee points out in his study, our students do put pen, or pencil, to paper frequently, and we teachers do work hard. It's the kind, not the amount, of writing in which we involve students that concerns Dr. Applebee. His first recommendation for improving writing instruction is that we use writing as a tool for learning rather than as a device for showing what has been learned.

The development of activities to help teachers and students use writing as a tool for learning is one of the goals of Writing in Content Areas, a cost-effective, innovative project funded by the Minnesota Council on Quality Education and located at Central High School in St. Paul. We use the term "expressive" writing for that writing which helps our students work out ideas, relationships, understandings, and feelings. The term was first applied to such writing by Dr. James Britton who studied the writing done in British schools. His analysis of the functions of school writing was adapted by Dr. Applebee for his study. Expressive writing is the basis for transactional writing, writing which fulfills a task, and for poetic writing, writing which is imaginative and literary.

Teachers can use expressive writing for many purposes. The primary purpose is to make students active learners. Expressive writing is effective because it forces students to participate constructively in learning: the student who will have to write a response after a film cannot just sit during the showing; the student who is discussing and writing in a small group is less likely to get by with snoozing in the back of the room.

Generating their own language in expressive writings helps your students think and learn; it also helps them become more fluent writers by providing many non-threatening opportunities for writing. Expressive writing activities should be frequent and are usually short and ungraded. This kind of writing can be incorporated into the learning experience of *any* content area class. Obviously, expressive writing activities will probably be more frequent in social studies than in industrial arts, but they have application everywhere. Some of the possibilities for using expressive writing are listed below; these suggested activities have been grouped under the purposes for which you might use them in your classroom.

Use writing to introduce a subject and to find out what your students already know

- Write down two things you already know about a subject, such as magnetism, and share them with the class.
- Respond to a word or term, such as health, and share the response.
- Do a focused free writing on a subject, such as the Civil War, to find out what you already know and what you need to learn.
- Answer a provocative question asked by the teacher or someone else.

BEST COPY

Use writing to help your students gain control of the subject material

- Do the 'recite' and 'review' of SQ3R in writing.
- Make side by side notes to correlate the class lectures or filmstrips with the reading assignments: these notes become study guides to use before tests.
- Write definitions of assigned terms in your own words: then write original sentences using those terms.
- Use writing to review for a test: write a quiz question and answer it in writing: then share the answer with the class.
- Practice writing discussion answers and review for a test at the same time: analyze the teacher's question, organize an appropriate answer, and write the answer.
- Write in your notebook three things learned from a reading assignment.
- Write an 'I learned' statement at the close of a class.
- Summarize, in your own words, an assigned reading or a lecture or a discussion or a film or a presentation or a field trip.
- Write to get 'unstuck' if you're stuck solving a problem or writing a paper. Write down everything you know and see what you come up with.

Use writing to help your students clarify their understanding of what they are learning

- Explain a concept, such as prime numbers or volume, to a younger person.
- Explain a pair of concepts such as surface area and volume.
- Write about an event, such as The Battle at Wounded Knee, from different viewpoints.
- After a discussion, or a film, write a focus statement explaining what you think the discussion or the film was all about.
- State a problem, or the terms of a disagreement, and suggest a solution.
- Respond to a classroom experience, such as hearing an outside speaker or taking a field trip.
- Write directions for a process — any process — which has been demonstrated, such as putting in a zipper or changing a sparkplug.
- Complete this statement: "The main idea of _____ is _____."
- Explain the meaning of a pictorial image such as a graph or a political cartoon.
- Relate a real life situation to a process or concept learned in school. For example, make up a math problem involving the measurement of an area for paint or carpeting.
- Write your opinion of an issue discussed, or to be discussed.
- Explain an abstract concept and its importance for you, such as one of the Rights guaranteed in the Bill of Rights.
- Solve a puzzle and then explain, in writing, what was required and how you went about the solution.
- Imagine that you are a character in literature or a person in history and write as if you are/were that person.
- Answer an explain question: how did you do a problem? Why did you do the problem as you did?
- Troubleshoot by pointing out what is wrong in a problem, or an answer, by finding what is incorrect and explaining how to fix the error.

Use writing to help your students know themselves and to help you understand them

- Reflect in writing on your experience as a learner, as a writer, or as a participant in some activity.
- Consider the qualities and skills which you have to offer an employer
- Think and write about why a particular college, or post high school program, would be right for you.
- Do a focused free writing about your experiences with music, or art, or on a job, or as a member of some group. Use such writings if you are writing an autobiography.
- Explain to the teacher which specific class activities helped you learn and which confused you.
- Keep a diary of your own process or experience completing a class activity, such as a science experiment or a writing assignment.

BEST COPY

Use writing to help your students develop materials for transactional and poetic writings

- Record images, facts, ideas for future use.
- Use cluster writings, or RUSH writings, or free writings as the basis for essays.
- Keep a reading log by writing in your notebook for five to ten minutes every time you finish a reading assignment. Use these response writings as the basis for discussion and/or essays.
- Keep notes of materials for finished writings, such as lab notes for lab reports in science classes, research notes on sources read for research papers, or interview notes or notes from observations and investigations for special projects.
- Develop writing maps after rereading your expressive writings: use those 'maps' to show relationships and to help organize your finished writings.

Obviously, when you try a suggested class activity from a list such as this, you must adapt it to your own students, content area, and teaching situation. At Central we have done that, but we have also learned several things which, I think, apply to any teacher's situation.

First, like any tool, the writing tool must be used often enough to become comfortable for the user. If we want our students to increase their content learning and to become more fluent writers, we must be coaches as well as teachers. A coach provides the team with many opportunities for practice. We need to use expressive writing activities which promote subject area learning as practice. That practice must be both guided and regular.

Second, we have learned that we must respond to the students' writing. If we do not, the students feel that the writing is unimportant. There are many ways to provide response to student writing. One is to have the students share their writings with their peers. This allows them to write for a real audience and to learn together; it also facilitates any group work we may want the students to do. We may also give points for writing activities completed. Even better, for the students, we may write a short comment in which we react as interested adults and fellow learners to the students' learning and insights. A teacher's response should not be a grade on short writing-to-learn activities. How often and to what length you respond will depend on your own teaching situation, but you will find that responses are necessary.

Finally, you need some way of managing all that paper. Teachers at Central have found that a teacher who plans to involve students in expressive writing activities must have a management system. Many teachers already require class notebooks and adapt these for expressive writings; others have folders for student work. Whatever your choice, a management system is essential if your students are going to do short ungraded writing activities several times a week. Personally, I prefer notebooks: notebooks make it easy to respond to the students' writings because all the writing is in one place, usually in the order done; also, notebooks require the student to take responsibility for the work while folders, often left in the classroom, tend to become my responsibility; notebooks can become study guides before tests; and, finally, notebooks become a record for the students to take with them when the class finishes. Dr. Toby Fulwiler of the University of Vermont has written an excellent article, "Journals across the Disciplines," (*English Journal*, December, 1980) which describes the rationale and possibilities for the use of what he names "class journals."

Every time I pick up a magazine or newspaper, or turn on the radio or television, I read, or hear, something about the crisis in our schools. We are told that our students do not know how to read, to think, to write. A look at Dr. Applebee's description of how writing is used in our schools suggests that we allow our students to be passive; we let them soak up, or ignore, what we are teaching; we do not require that they think and generate their own language as they learn. Using writing as a tool for learning can make our students active learners at the same time that it makes them more effective learners and more fluent users of language.

Greta Michaels
Project Teacher
Writing in Content Areas
Central High School
275 North Lexington Parkway
St. Paul, MN 55108

BEST COPY